

# Teacher Expectations of Student Behavior:

## *Social Skills Necessary for Success in Elementary School Classrooms*

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This study explored elementary school teachers' expectations of student behavior in terms of teachers' demographic characteristics as well as level (primary vs. intermediate vs. combined) and program type (general vs. special educator). Teachers identified which social skills they viewed as critical for success in their classrooms. Results showed that primary and intermediate teachers view skills in the areas of self-control and cooperation as equally important for success and perceive assertion skills as substantially less important. General and special educators placed similar value on the importance of assertion and self-control skills, but general educators viewed cooperation skills as more essential for success than did special educators. Implications for prereferral intervention and service delivery for special education students are discussed.

When children enter the school system, they are expected to have certain skills and experiences that will enable them to negotiate the academic and social task demands of the school environment. For example, students are expected to have exposure to print, adequate expressive and receptive language skills, the ability to follow directions and comply with basic requests, problem-solving skills, and a variety of interpersonal skills (Hersh & Walker, 1983; O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2002; Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992). Students who lack these requisite skills are at risk for a variety of pejorative outcomes, including academic underachievement, failed social relationships with their peers, and strained relationships with their teachers (Walker & Severson, 2002). Furthermore, students whose academic, social, and behavioral skills deviate substantially from the norm are more likely to be referred to the prereferral intervention team for support services (Lane, Mahdavi, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2002).

The purpose of the prereferral intervention team is to generate interventions to help meet the needs of students who are experiencing difficulties in the general education setting (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989; Fuchs et al., 1990). Moreover, the intent of the prereferral intervention team is to reduce the number of inappropriate requests for special education assessments while increasing student success—academically and behaviorally—in general education (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bahr, 1990; Nevin & Thousand, 1987). However, the prereferral intervention process has some limitations, such as a lack of direct support with intervention implementation and poor treatment integrity (Lane, Beebe-Frankenberger, Lambros, &

Pierson, 2001; Lane et al., 2002). Another concern about the prereferral intervention process is the issue of goal alignment. Namely, the issues of teacher tolerance and behavioral expectations often are not explicitly addressed during the goal-selection phase (Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1991). In order to maximize student outcomes, the interventions generated by the prereferral intervention team should, in part, clarify the teachers' expectations and then help students acquire the necessary skills to negotiate the academic and social demands of the classroom (Raymond, 2000). Given that general educators are the primary source of referrals (Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum, & Roe, 1991), it is particularly important to identify student behaviors these teachers deem necessary for school success.

If the interventions generated by the prereferral intervention team do not bring about the desired changes after having been implemented with fidelity over a reasonable period of time, the teacher may refer the student for assessment to determine if he or she is eligible for special education and related services. If eligible for services, the student will receive more intensive, individualized support, as delineated in his or her Individualized Education Program. Once placed in special education, the student must perform according to the special education teachers' expectations. In fact, given the trend toward inclusive programming (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; MacMillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996), students receiving special education services are actually required to meet the behavioral expectations of both general and special education teachers. This is a formidable task for students who, by defi-

nition, have been unsuccessful in negotiating the demands of general education. Consequently, it is important to identify the extent to which general and special educators converge and diverge in their views about the social skills necessary for students to perform successfully in the classroom.

Research by Walker and colleagues (Hersh & Walker, 1983; Walker et al., 1992) identified teacher-preferred behaviors that, if absent, lead to referral. These behaviors have been incorporated into the Model of Interpersonal Social-Behavioral Competence Within School Settings. In brief, the model illustrated that when students' behavioral repertoires contain adaptive behaviors referred to as "enhancers" (e.g., comply promptly, cooperate with peers), they are more likely to experience positive teacher- and peer-related adjustment (e.g., teacher and peer acceptance, school achievement and success, friendships; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995; Walker et al., 1992). In contrast, students whose behavioral repertoires are characterized by maladaptive behaviors referred to as "impairers" (e.g., defy teacher, disrupt the group) are more likely to be met with negative outcomes, such as teacher rejection, school failure, and social rejection.

Thus, this model provides information on behavioral correlates associated with teacher- and peer-related adjustment as well as school success. Further, these empirically derived correlates have been effective in differentiating between rejected and nonrejected students and between students with and without behavior disorders (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Walker & McConnell, 1988). Given the utility of these behavioral correlates in predicting important outcomes for students, there is a need to explore the nature of teacher expectations further. Namely, to better inform interventions generated by the prereferral intervention teams and to promote successful inclusive educational experiences for students receiving special education services, questions must be answered about sociobehavioral expectations. Some questions that warrant attention are

- Which social skills do teachers view as crucial to success in the classroom?
- Are these perceptions consistent across the grade span, or do the expectations increase over time?
- Do general and special educators hold similar views on expectations?

Gresham, Dolstra, Lambros, McLaughlin, and Lane (2000) attempted to answer some of these questions by examining social skills rated by upper elementary school teachers as critical to classroom success. Findings suggested that teachers view self-control and cooperation as more important than assertion skills to classroom success. In addition, expectations of students' social competence changed between fourth and sixth grade, with the number of social skills viewed as critical for classroom success increasing between fourth and sixth grade. However, this study was limited because minimal

information was collected on the responding teachers. Additional information such as teaching experience, classroom assignment, and gender could have provided a more vivid picture of the teacher characteristics that may influence behavioral expectations.

The intent of this study was to extend previous work in the area of teacher expectations by addressing the following three objectives:

1. to examine the extent to which elementary teachers view student competence in the areas of assertion, self-control, and cooperation as essential for school success;
2. to identify specific skills teachers view as pivotal for success; and
3. to determine whether level (primary vs. intermediate vs. combined), program type (general vs. special educator), or experience (novice vs. experienced) affects expectations of student behaviors.

## Method

### Participants

One hundred twenty-six teachers at four elementary schools (School 1,  $n = 37$ ; School 2,  $n = 26$ ; School 3,  $n = 31$ ; School 4,  $n = 32$ ) from two districts in southern California (District 1,  $n = 94$ ; District 2,  $n = 32$ ) completed a brief, anonymous questionnaire on the social skills necessary for success in general education classrooms (see Table 1 for participant characteristics). A chi-square analysis contrasting credential status  $\times$  grade level,  $\chi^2(2, N = 123) = 4.12, p = 0.13$ , was not significant. Due to low cell sizes, chi-square analyses contrasting credential status  $\times$  program type, credential status  $\times$  teaching experience, gender  $\times$  program type, gender  $\times$  grade level, and gender  $\times$  teaching experience were not reported, as the chi-square results may not be valid.

### Procedure

After obtaining permission to conduct the study at the university level, three relatively small, ethnically diverse, suburban school districts in Southern California were invited to participate. One district declined, citing concerns about teacher time. Four elementary schools in the remaining two districts were randomly selected and invited to participate. Principals of four elementary schools, three in District 1 and one in District 2, agreed to participate by asking all school site teachers to complete a brief, anonymous questionnaire regarding teacher expectations of student behaviors.

The third author attended a staff meeting at each elementary school to explain the purpose of the study, distribute an introductory letter to teachers, and seek teacher participa-

TABLE 1. Participant Characteristics

Variable	Total sample	
	%	n
Gender		
Boys	8.87	11
Girls	91.13	113
Program type		
General	83.33	105
Special	14.29	18
Other	2.38	3
Credential status		
Certificated	73.02	92
Substitute/emergency	26.98	34
Grade level taught		
Primary (K-3)	62.00	78
Intermediate (4-6)	25.00	32
Combined (K-6)	13.00	16
Teaching experience		
Novice (< 5 years)	40.48	51
Experienced (5+ years)	59.52	75

Note. N = 126. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed the given item.

tion. Teachers who were willing to participate completed the questionnaire in approximately 10 to 15 minutes during the staff meeting. Completed questionnaires were collected using a sealed box with a slot in the top in order to maintain anonymity. Response rates for each school ranged from 71.11% to 96.30% ( $M = 86.52$ ,  $SD = 11.69$ ).

After assigning unique identification numbers to each instrument, data were entered by a research associate with a master's degree in special education. Fidelity of data entry was assessed by having a master's-level research assistant randomly select and verify data entry of 25% ( $n = 32$ ) of the surveys. No data entry errors were detected.

### Instrumentation

The questionnaire contained two sections: social skills items and demographic information. First, teachers were asked to read a list of 30 social skills items from the *Social Skills Rating System* (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Teachers were then asked to rate the importance of each skill to students' success in their classrooms on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = *not important*, 1 = *important*, 2 = *critical*). These 30 items constitute three factor-analytically derived domains: assertion (e.g., initiates conversations with peers, volunteers to help peers with tasks, joins ongoing activities), self-control (e.g., controls temper with peers, responds appropriately to peer pressure, receives criticism well), and cooperation (e.g., attends to instructions, finishes class assignments within time limits, pro-

duces correct school work). Total scores for assertion, self-control, and cooperation domains were computed by summing the scores for each of the 10 items constituting each domain. Thus, total scores for each domain ranged from 0 to 20.

Coefficient alpha reliabilities for the social skills domains were as follows: assertion, 0.85 for males, 0.87 for females; self-control, 0.92 for males, 0.89 for females; and cooperation, 0.91 for males, 0.91 for females. The coefficient alpha for the total scale was 0.94 for males and 0.93 for females. Validity studies for the teacher form of the SSRS, with respect to the *Social Behavior Assessment* (Stephens, 1978), the *Child Behavior Checklist-Teacher Report Form* (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983), and the *Harter Teacher Rating Scale* (Harter, 1985), ranged from  $-.64$  to  $.70$  for the Social Skills subscale.

Next, teachers completed basic background information, such as gender, grade level currently taught, program type (e.g., general vs. special education), years of teaching experience, and credentials held. Limited demographic information was requested, to protect teacher anonymity and increase the probability of the teachers' completing the survey. For data analysis purposes, categorical variables were created. Specifically, years of teaching experience was grouped into two categories: novices (fewer than 5 years) and experienced teachers (5 or more years). Grade level taught was divided into three categories: primary (K-3), intermediate (4-6), and combined (K-6). Grading practices in these districts shift from giving scores of "outstanding," "satisfactory," and "unsatisfactory" in the primary grades to using letter grades in the intermediate grades. We reasoned that teachers' expectations may shift between primary and intermediate levels as the curriculum becomes more differentiated and grading practices more rigorous. The combined category consisted of teachers who taught various combinations of grades that spanned the primary and intermediate levels.

## Results

**Question 1:** *To what extent do elementary teachers view student competence in the areas of assertion, self-control, and cooperation as essential for school success?* Descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and correlations, were examined to establish the extent to which elementary teachers view student competence in the areas of assertion, self-control, and cooperation as essential for school success. A one-way, repeated-measures ANOVA revealed significant differences among assertion, self-control, and cooperation scores,  $F(2, 124) = 106.30$ ,  $p = .0001$  (Greenhouse-Geisser epsilon value = 0.91; Kleinbaum, Kupper, Muller, & Nizam, 1998). Simple contrast indicated that assertion scores were significantly lower than self-control scores,  $F(1, 125) = 203.01$ ,  $p < .0001$  (effect size = 1.19), and cooperation scores,  $F(1, 125) = 144.10$ ,  $p < .0001$  (effect size = 1.21). Self-control and cooperation skills were viewed as equally important for school suc-

TABLE 2. Mean Scores by Comparison Groups

Group compared	Skill					
	Assertion		Self-control		Cooperation	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Grade level taught						
Primary (K-3)	9.74	3.96	13.88	3.84	14.13	3.29
Intermediate (4-6)	10.31	3.51	15.03	3.87	15.03	3.90
Combined (K-6)	9.81	3.51	13.81	2.40	12.19	2.66
Program type						
General	9.73	3.84	14.41	3.72	14.57	3.28
Special	9.39	3.42	12.61	3.47	11.50	3.68
Experience						
Beginning (< 5 years)	10.51	2.61	14.35	3.24	14.08	3.63
Experienced (5 + years)	9.20	4.34	14.04	4.02	14.13	3.36
Total sample	9.73	3.78	14.17	3.71	14.11	3.46

TABLE 3. Specific Skills Rated as Essential for Success by the Majority of Participants

Item	Domain	Similar items in model behavior profile <sup>a</sup>	Item total correlations	Majority responses	
				%	n
1. Controls temper with peers	Self-control	X	0.47*	69.84	88
8. Uses free time acceptably	Cooperation		0.65*	54.40	68
12. Controls temper with adults	Self-control	X	0.73*	65.87	83
20. Follows directions	Cooperation	X	0.61*	83.33	105
25. Responds appropriately when hit	Self-control	X	0.64*	54.76	69
28. Attends to instructions	Cooperation	X	0.65*	80.16	101
30. Gets along with people	Self-control		0.62*	55.20	69

Note. Item total correlations refer to the correlation between the individual item and the composite of the 10 items constituting the given social skill domain. Coefficient alpha reliability estimates for cooperation and self-control domains for this sample were more than adequate, with respective scores of .85 and .84.

<sup>a</sup>Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992.

\**p* < .0001.

cess (effect size = 0.002). Effect sizes were calculated using the pooled variances as the error term (Busk & Serlin, 1992). (See Table 2 for group means.)

*Question 2: Which social skills do teachers view as pivotal for success in their classrooms?* Frequency distributions at the item level were explored to identify specific skills that more than 50% of the participants viewed as pivotal for success as evidenced by a rating of 2 (critical importance). Results indicated that the majority of teachers (greater than 50%) identified seven skills as critical (see Table 3). It is interesting to note that none of the items in the assertion domain was rated as critical for success by the majority of the teachers.

*Question 3: To what degree do teachers differ in their expectations of student behaviors?* Three one-way fixed-effects

multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were computed using the general linear model to compare differences in expectations between subgroups of teachers (e.g., primary vs. lower vs. combined teachers, general vs. special educators, novice vs. experienced teachers). When conducting MANOVAs, the subgroup membership was treated as a fixed-effects factor. Dependent variables were total scores for assertion, self-control, and cooperation. All multivariate analyses were tested using Wilks's lambda ( $\Lambda$ ) criterion, although several criteria (e.g., Wilks's lambda, Pillai's trace, and Roy's maximum root) led to the same decisions regarding statistical significance. ANOVAs were corrected for Type I error rate using the Bonferroni adjustment, based on the number of ANOVAs computed subsequent to each MANOVA. Multiple comparisons

were not necessary, given that each comparison involved only two groups (Huck & McLean, 1975; Kleinbaum et al., 1998). The one-way MANOVA comparing primary, intermediate, and combined teachers did not achieve significance, Wilks's lambda = 0.92,  $F(6, 242) = 1.71, p = 0.12$ , accounting for 8% of the explained variance. Univariate ANOVAs were not interpreted, given that the MANOVA was not significant (see Table 2).

The MANOVA comparing expectations of general and special educators on the same variables showed a significant multivariate effect, Wilks's lambda = 0.90,  $F(3, 119) = 4.65, p = .01$ , accounting for 10% of the explained variance. A series of ANOVAs showed a group effect for cooperation skills,  $F(1, 121) = 12.99, p < .001$ , with general educators expecting higher levels of cooperation. However, there were no significant differences between the general and special educators on assertion or self-control, although the findings related to self-control skills approached significance,  $F(1, 121) = 3.66, p = .0581$  (see Table 2).

The MANOVA comparing novice and experienced elementary teachers was not significant, Wilks's lambda = 0.96,  $F(3, 122) = 1.51, p = .2163$ , accounting for 4% of the explained variance. Univariate ANOVAs were not interpreted, given that the MANOVA was not significant (see Table 2).

## Discussion

To help prereferral intervention teams design more effective interventions and to increase the probability of successful educational experiences for students receiving special education services, educators need to better understand the social and behavioral expectations teachers hold for students. The purpose of this study was to extend understanding of elementary school teachers' expectations of student behavior by asking teachers to identify which social skills they viewed as critical for success in their classrooms.

Findings indicated that teachers view self-control and cooperation skills as equally important for success but perceive assertion skills as less important. The majority of teachers identified seven social skills to be critical for success in their classrooms:

1. follows directions,
2. attends to instructions,
3. controls temper with peers,
4. controls temper with adults,
5. gets along with people who are different,
6. responds appropriately when hit, and
7. uses free time in an acceptable way.

Items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 are similar to behaviors identified as adaptive in Walker et al.'s (1992) model of interpersonal social-behavioral competence within school settings. Thus, skills identified in this study and in Walker et al.'s model are those

skills that emphasize restraint, minimize disruption, encourage compliance, and, consequently, foster instruction. It is interesting to note that none of the seven items constituted the assertion domain; this also parallels the findings by Gresham and colleagues (2000). Collectively these findings indicate that teachers value skills that promote harmony in the classroom (Gresham et al., 2000) by facilitating instructional activities and minimizing assertive behaviors that teachers might perceive to be challenging or disruptive.

This information has important implications for the prereferral intervention team process and might improve intervention efficacy by ensuring that students not only receive academic interventions but also develop the skills necessary to manage classroom demands. For example, because teachers view cooperation and self-control to be of greater importance than assertion, it may be necessary for students to be taught not to appear challenging when making their assistance needs known and when managing conflict in the classroom.

Findings also revealed some noteworthy differences and similarities between teachers. First, regardless of grade level taught (primary, intermediate, or combined), teachers had similar expectations about the importance of assertion, cooperation, and self-control skills for students in their classrooms. All teachers valued assertion skills less than the other two skills.

Similarly, general and special education teachers had parallel views in the areas of assertion and self-control skills. In contrast, they had different expectations with respect to cooperation. General education teachers viewed cooperation skills as more essential for success than did special education teachers. This difference may occur because general educators are charged with the responsibility of managing a greater number of children on a daily basis, which may make cooperation a necessary skill. Alternatively, special educators may be more accustomed to teaching children with challenging behaviors and consequently are more comfortable teaching children with poorer cooperation skills. Regardless of the cause of this difference, this finding has implications for the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in general education. At a minimum, students should be informed about the skills general education teachers deem essential for success in their classrooms. Ideally, students would be provided explicit instruction, via social skills training (Elliott & Gresham, 1991), in these skill areas prior to placement in general education settings. Further, it is important for general and special educators to be aware of these differences so they can either take steps to align their expectations or, at a minimum, assist students in negotiating differential expectations.

The final comparison between novice and experienced teachers, once again, did not reveal a significant difference in expectations. Novice and experienced teachers held similar views of the importance of assertion, cooperation, and self-control skills.

Before closing, it is important to note limitations of this work. For example, this study used self-report data to identify

which student behaviors teachers viewed as essential for success in their classrooms, even though discrepancies between verbal reports and observed expectations often occur (Bergan & Kratochwill, 1990). Future investigations could be improved by using direct observations to determine whether teacher-identified student behaviors (e.g., following directions) are actually positively reinforced in the classroom. It may be that teachers are not actually reinforcing the skills that they report as critical. Conversely, it is possible that teachers unintentionally reinforce behaviors that they deem to be counterproductive. This has been observed and documented in the work examining parenting practices involving children with anti-social behavior patterns (Reid & Patterson, 1991; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2002) and may be true of teacher-student interaction patterns as well.

Further, it may be that teacher expectations are not uniform across students; they may be more ideographic in nature. As such, an additional improvement in subsequent research would be to explore the possibility of student-specific expectations by asking teachers to rate the importance of specific skills for different students in their classrooms. It is possible that teachers might adjust their views of what it takes to successfully negotiate the academic and social demands of the classroom environment in light of the unique characteristics and abilities of the students they serve.

A final consideration for future investigations pertains to sample size and statistical power. Due to low cells sizes ( $n < 8$ ), it was not possible to conduct factorial MANOVAs to explore the interactions among variables (e.g., teacher experience, program type, and grade level taught). Future investigations could be improved by securing sufficiently large sample sizes to permit higher level analyses to be conducted. For example, it would have been useful to examine the interaction between program type (general or special education) and grade level (primary, intermediate, or combined) to determine if the effect of grade level on cooperation, assertion, and self-control variables was different for the two program types (Kleinbaum et al., 1998).

Despite these limitations, our findings do confirm and extend the findings of earlier investigations (Gresham et al., 2000; Walker et al., 1992) examining teacher expectations. Moreover, results parallel the outcomes of early work: Teachers view cooperation and self-control skills as important to school success, with general educators placing a much stronger emphasis on cooperation skills than their special education counterparts. Further, elementary teachers, as a whole, viewed assertion skills as significantly less important than cooperation and self-control skills. Results extend previous investigations by exploring potential differences in the behavioral expectations held by general and special educators, novice and experienced teachers, and primary and intermediate teachers. Findings revealed different expectations between general and special educators in the area of cooperation and similar expectations across the grade span and across teachers with varying degrees of experience.

As such, this information may be useful in informing the interventions generated by prereferral intervention teams to enhance a student's ability to meet the academic and social demands of classrooms. Similarly, this information can be used to help students better meet the different expectations of general and special educators for cooperation.

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